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ABSTRACT

A collaborative study between 100 Phi Delta Kappa chapters attempted to answer the following questions about at-risk students: (1) who is at risk; (2) what are they like; (3) what is the school doing to help these students; and (4) how effective are these efforts? Each chapter identified three representative public schools in its area: one elementary, one middle school, and one high school. In each school, the chapter interviewed the principal, surveyed teachers, wrote a narrative report about the school, and collected data about 100 students in each school. A "holding power statistic" was applied to the high school and an in-depth case study of one at-risk student was completed which included video-taped interviews. Results of data gathered from 22,018 students were used to produce an "at-risk scale," with the upper quartile designated as at-risk. Schools' efforts were examined from several perspectives including viewpoints of teachers and principals. Results indicated that principals and teachers agreed that teachers, rather than parents or the students themselves, should be responsible for helping students acquire reading comprehension. A school effort score indicated that few school interventions were provided for at-risk students and that a minimal relationship between the degree of the at-risk score and the school effort score existed. The ultimate goal of follow-up research is to identify at-risk students and provide appropriate interventions before the students experience failure. (One figure and three tables of data are included.) (MG)

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A Study of Students at Risk

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Paper presented at IRA, 1990

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A Study of Students At Risk

Young people may succeed or fail, in school or in life. All children need assistance to succeed. If there is even a likelihood that they might fail, they need special assistance. Children who might fail--in school or in life--are said to be at risk. The collaborative research project of 100 Phi Delta Kappa chapters attempted something that had never been done before--replicate one study, simultaneously and with great care, in 100 communities across the nation. A major study of an important problem has been accomplished using the structure of a professional organization as a vehicle, which may be an important innovation in research methodology (Frymier, 1989). Four questions were posed for the research project:

1. Who is at risk?
2. What are they like?
3. What is the school doing to help these students?
4. How effective are these efforts?

Current concern about at-risk students is also evident among other organizations for professional educators. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development published a themed issue of Educational Leadership in February 1989 titled "Dealing

with Diversity: At Risk Students." In addition to dedicating this issue of the Journal of Reading to reading instruction for at risk students, Reading Today (April/May 1989) reported that the International Reading Association and the Association of American Publishers will develop two model programs for at-risk children.

Identifying At-Risk Students

The first two questions dealt with the dilemma of identifying at-risk students. Previous research has indicated that teachers' judgment is influenced by the make up of the entire class and more objective assessment instruments should be used (Kagan, 1988). Risk factors identified in previous studies included: family crises, suicide, and student abduction (Cormany, 1987); academic ability, anxiety, and self-concept (Stevens, 1987); ill health, poor housing, inadequate nutrition, and unsafe streets (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1987); lack of participation in school activities, drug and alcohol use, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, school dropouts, teenage suicide, and student achievement (Pennsylvania State Department of Education, 1987); reading achievement, mathematics achievement, absenteeism, disciplinary referral, and attitude toward school (Griffin, 1984); and low

achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students. Eligibility for Chapter 1, special education, or other remedial services has also served as a practical criterion for at-riskness (Slavin and Madden, 1989).

The Study of Students At Risk was a collaborative project involving 100 Phi Delta Kappa chapters (see Figure 1) who were selected from 240 chapters submitting proposals to participate.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Each chapter identified three representative public schools in its area: one elementary, one middle school, and one high school. In each school, the chapter interviewed the principal, surveyed the teachers, wrote a narrative report about the school, and collected data about 100 students in each school. In addition, a "Holding Power Statistic" was applied to the high school and an in-depth case study of one at-risk student was completed including video-taped interviews. Chapters were also encouraged to complete optional projects. A Manual of Instructions was delivered to

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Local Phi Delta Kappa chapters selected to participate in the collaborative study.

each participating chapter and procedural training was provided in Kansas City for one representative from each of the chapters. Following data collection, interpretation of the data was discussed at district-level meetings.

The Information about Students consisted of 58 items that were recorded on Scantron forms. The material was gathered from cumulative records and interviews with teachers and guidance counselors. The data included background information, such as parents' occupation, education, and family grouping; school factors, such as achievement, grades, and attendance; stress indicators, such recent divorce or death of a parent; and personal information, such as drug abuse or pregnancy. The responses to 45 of the items were weighted and their sum produced an at-risk score.

Insert Table 1 about here

For example, Table 1 lists the results of an item related to reading instruction: the student's scores on norm-referenced standardized achievement tests in Reading. Option #1, below the 20th percentile, was designated as "at risk" for the item and received a weight of "4." Approximately ten percent of the

Table 1

Information about Students: Items related to reading instruction

13. Student's scores on norm-referenced standardized achievement tests in Reading:

	Below 20%ile	21-40%ile	41-60%ile	61-80%ile	Above 80%ile
	1	2	3	4	5
All	9	16	22	20	19
4th	11	18	25	22	23
7th	10	18	25	24	24
10th	11	20	27	23	19

Note. All figures are given as percentages of those who responded. All students N=22,018; 4th Grade N=6173; 7th Grade N=7762; 10th Grade N=7417.

students across the grades were considered at risk on this factor. The results of the data gathered from 22,018 students were used to produce an At-Risk Scale, with the upper quartile designated as at-risk (see Table 2). Therefore, any student with a score of 14 or above may be considered to be at risk for failure in school or in life.

Insert Table 2 about here

The At Risk Scores for individual students have been interpreted very cautiously for several reasons. Because this was the first attempt in using the scale, there had been no opportunity to validate the scores. After further study, it may become necessary to adjust the weighting of several factors. Also, some information was not available from school records or staff. The missing items may have resulted in lower scores, thus under-identifying at risk students. However, the concept of a predictor score may prove very helpful in future identification of students for early intervention.

Assisting At-Risk Students

Once the at-risk student population has been identified, strategies must be designed to meet their

Table 2

At Risk Scale: Scores considered to indicate at-risk students.

Percentile	Score
75	14
90	23
95	29
98	38
99	45

Note. Maximum Score=121. N=22,018. X=9.86.

special needs. The last two questions of the Phi Delta Kappa study address this issue:

> What is the school doing to help these students?
>
> How effective are these efforts?

Previous research indicated that school policies and practices actually increase school dropout rates; but schools can change their practices to reduce dropout rates and, with remediation, improve the education of all students (Bing, 1986). The Council of Chief State School Officers (1987) outlined a plan for entering the twenty-first century with virtually all students graduating from high school. Griffin (1984) examined the relationship between alternative school programs and student success. Schools can be more successful with more students if they identify students in need of assistance and improve educational practices (Pennsylvania State Department of Education, 1982). Cuban (1989) asserted that the future of urban schools, largely bypassed by recent state reforms, is the primary issue facing our nation's educational system. He suggested the "creation" of schools and classrooms based on research findings and practitioner wisdom.

In the Phi Delta Kappa Study the school's efforts were examined from several perspectives. The viewpoint

of teachers and principals is represented in Table 3. When teachers were asked to rate the reading comprehension of their students, they placed almost half of the students in the middle category, but only 17 percent across the grades were identified as above average.

Insert Table 3 about here

Regarding their feelings of responsibility for the reading comprehension of their students, 59 percent of elementary teachers considered themselves "very responsible" as compared to 23 percent of high school teachers. However, only 32 percent of elementary teachers and 9 percent of high school teachers felt that they had "a great deal" of influence over students' reading comprehension. Apparently, teachers felt that their responsibility was greater than the actual effect of their influence. It is interesting to note that 36 percent of principals felt they exerted "a great deal" of influence on students' reading comprehension. Both principals and teachers at all levels agreed that teachers should be most responsible for helping students acquire reading comprehension skills, rather than parents or the students themselves

Table 3

Teacher Survey and Principal Interview: Items related to reading instruction

Compared to students in general, rate the students you teach on the following factors:

1. reading comprehension

	Below Average				Above Average
	1	2	3	4	5
All teachers	15	24	43	14	3
Elementary	14	21	43	17	5
Middle school	15	24	44	14	4
High school	15	26	43	13	3

How responsible do you feel for specific learnings or behaviors of the students you teach?

11. reading comprehension

	Not Very			Very
	1	2	3	4
All teachers	10	22	35	33
Elementary	4	7	31	59
Middle school	11	26	35	29
High school	13	27	37	23

(Table 3--continued)

How much influence do you have over students'?:

21. reading comprehension

	Not Very Much			A Great Deal
	1	2	3	4
Principals	1	12	51	36
All teachers	17	20	38	15
Elementary	5	12	51	32
Middle school	19	33	37	12
High school	21	37	33	9

Please indicate which of the groups listed (parents, teachers, or students) should be most responsible for helping students acquire the learning or behavior specified:

	Parents	Teachers	Students
	1	2	3
Principals	8	80	12
All teachers	9	82	9
Elementary	4	90	6
Middle school	10	81	9
High school	11	78	10

Note. All figures are given as percentages. Principals N=267, All teachers N=9652, Elementary N=2078, Middle school N=2822, High school N=4359.

being most responsible.

Another indication of the school's efforts in dealing with at-risk students was the Holding Power Statistic calculated for each high school in the study. First, all ninth graders from four years earlier were identified. Then each student was accounted for as having graduated, requested a transcript, died, been institutionalized, or being still enrolled in school. The percentage of students accounted for was expressed as the Holding Power Statistic. The overall average for the 95 high schools participating was 78.6%, with scores ranging from 37% at one school, to four schools with 100%.

A School Effort Score was also computed for each student based on the sum of the thirteen possible school interventions from the Scantron sheets used to record Information about Students. Each response was equally weighted. A preliminary analysis indicated that few school interventions were provided for at-risk students and there was a minimal relationship between the degree of the At-Risk Score and the School Effort Score, but both scales are subject to further validation.

A final perspective on the school's attempts to deal with at risk students was expressed by teenagers

who had dropped out of school. Those who were interviewed represented a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds and ability levels. Some had been placed in gifted programs while others were functionally illiterate, but they shared one common opinion: no one in the school system had "really cared" about them. This was the primary reason given for droppping out. Some of their comments were: "These people are not like me. They're not going through what I'm going through." "People there act better than you." Several who had returned to an after-school program to earn their high school diplomas commented that the teachers in the alternative program did care, and they cited the staff as the major reason for staying in the after-school program.

Implications for At-Risk Students

The collaborative study directed by Phi Delta Kappa has collected information about students at risk from the perspectives of principals, teachers, and students. Three computations have been generated: the At-Risk Score for students and the School Effort Score and Holding Power Statistic for schools. One important contribution of the study is the model of using the structure of a professional organization as a vehicle for research. The full impact of the study remains to

be seen as further analyses of the data and follow-up studies are conducted. The ultimate goal is to identify at-risk students and provide appropriate intervention before the students experience failure.

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